

Acknowledgements

We should like to thank Dr Robert Prŷs-Jones for his help with the literature and for much useful discussion during the preparation of the first draft of this paper. We are also most grateful to P. R. Colston, Michael Walters and Mrs F. E. Warr at the Natural History Museum, Tring, and to the rest of the museum staff for their help during this study and at all other times. We also warmly thank Dr David Snow for his help and advice during the preparation of this paper.

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The continuing presence of Macgregor's Bird of Paradise *Macgregoria pulchra* on Mount Albert Edward, Papua New Guinea

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Received 30 August 1995

Macgregor's Bird of Paradise *Macgregoria pulchra* is a little-known species in a monotypic genus endemic to the highest areas of the central ranges of New Guinea. It occurs in the Snow and Star Mountains of west and central New Guinea, and in the mountains of the southeast (Beehler *et al.* 1986, Coates 1990). It is unknown between these two areas, despite much apparently suitable habitat. The species is large and unwary and so is often hunted. Collar *et al.* (1994) added it to the Red List as a globally threatened species, on the basis of small population size, fragmentation of range and presumed declines caused by hunting.

The southeastern population lives entirely within Papua New Guinea, with records from a 70 km strip of the central cordillera between Mount Albert Edward (Wharton Range) and Mount Victoria

(Owen Stanley Range). Recent reports confirm the survival of this population on Mount Victoria (Barker & Croft 1977), Mount Scratchley (Clapp 1986) and English Peaks (Beehler 1991). Local fluctuations in abundance are well-known at English Peaks (Beehler 1991, Hicks & Burrows 1992) and are believed to result from nomadism in response to food availability. This makes true population changes difficult to detect. However, on Mount Albert Edward, *Macgregoria* was last recorded in July 1933 (Mayr & Rand 1937), despite visits by several observers at various seasons since then (Bell 1971, Barker & Croft 1977, P. Lambley pers. comm. 1995). The possible disappearance of the species from one of the few sites from which it is known is disturbing (Beehler 1991). It is therefore noteworthy that *Macgregoria* was seen again close to Mount Albert Edward in April 1995. This note describes the record.

We were present above 2800 m altitude (the species' usual lower limit) for a little over five days. Three days were spent around Murray Pass (2800–3000 m), the remaining time around the grassy basin of the Guimu River, often called the Neon, or Neowa, Basin (2870–3100 m). The area explored was therefore a southwestern extension of the major alpine area of Mount Albert Edward (3990 m). Below Murray Pass, vegetation appeared to be lower montane forest (*sensu* Paijmans 1976). The pass and environs contain several km² of tree-fern (*Cyathea* sp.) grassland. Slopes around the Neon Basin hold a mosaic of upper montane forest and tree-fern grassland. The Basin itself contains about 15 km² of flat, open grassland almost devoid of tree-ferns.

No sign of *Macgregoria* was found until 0800 hr on 11 April 1995, when a group of three was found in upper montane forest at the edge of a small clearing on the southwest slope of the Neon Basin, along a path leading directly from the Basin to Woitape (at 3080 m; 8°30'S, 147°18'E). The birds attracted attention by their wingbeats, which were the loudest of any species in the area, and were watched for ten minutes before being lost to view. Identification was based on the large size and brilliant yellow caruncle and duller yellowish patch on the primaries contrasting with the otherwise black plumage. The legs were blue-grey, looking thick. No call was heard. The birds foraged in thick, low shrubbery or in taller, more open trees. In the latter, they hopped along branches with feet together, frequently tearing moss off branches with the bill, and then dropping it; one bird did this five times in rapid succession. No prey item was seen and no fruit was taken. *Macgregoria* is believed to feed mostly on fruit of the conifer *Dacrycarpus compactus*; unidentified conifers were frequent, but not dominant, in the area, but none was seen fruiting.

In 1933, *Macgregoria* was common on the main dome around 3680 m but only two were seen at Murray Pass (Mayr & Rand 1937). We did not reach the former area. Our single record in five days, and the failure of recent visitors to find any, suggest that *Macgregoria* is rare in the area. Knowledgeable villagers in the area support this view (P. Lambley pers. comm. 1995), although those we met were unreliable. The area we visited is much used by local hunters who frequently set fires; however, few locals seemed to visit the main dome.

Mount Albert Edward is at the centre of a 180 km² area entirely above 3000 m, important for several other rare birds of high altitudes, such as Salvadori's Teal *Anas waigiuiensis*, Logrunner *Orthonyx temminckii*, Mountain Robin *Petroica bivittata*, Greater Ground Robin *Amalocichla sclateriana*, Black Strella *Daphoenositta miranda* and Eastern Alpine Mannikin *Lonchura monticola* (Mayr & Rand 1937; pers. obs.). Further highland areas extend to the northwest but are little-known. To the southeast, Mounts Scratchley and Victoria can be reached from the Mount Albert Edward highlands without dropping below 2960 m. Therefore it may be possible for *Macgregoria* to travel the length of this part of its range without leaving its favoured habitat. Further study is needed to establish whether this actually happens.

This observation shows that *Macgregoria* has not become extinct on Mount Albert Edward, as seemed possible beforehand. However, the species' long-term habitat area requirements and vulnerability to hunting remain unknown. The logistical problems of studying it are daunting (Beehler 1991), so it is noteworthy that the site of our observation is one day's walk from Woitape, a readily-accessible village.

Acknowledgements

We were present in Papua New Guinea through employment on the Lakekamu Integrated Conservation and Development Project, and thank the Government of Papua New Guinea for allowing this. Bruce Beehler encouraged and supported our visit to Mount Albert Edward, and commented on a draft manuscript. British Airways Assisting Conservation provided our flights between U.K. and Australia. Peter Lambley provided additional information.

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